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How Consumer Action Can Help Build a Sustainable Future for Fashion

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The Current Position

The world is facing a *climate emergency*. A phrase that Greta Thunberg (2019), a 16-year-old student and environmental activist from Sweden is insisting we use to describe the current global situation. United Nations (2019) have announced that there is only 11 years to take-action to prevent irreversible damage to the planet due to climate change, meaning that immediate large-scale change is needed. The equilibrium between humanity and nature has become unbalanced, with a sustained period of overuse resulting in an urgent call for a shift in daily activities to help prevent an irrevocable impact on the planet. Consequently, this human influence on the world has triggered the Anthropocene, a geological term that indicates the global scale of environmental change brought about by human activity (Brooks et.al., 2017). Considered by many as custodians of the global eco-system (Harwood-Jones, 1985), humans are both the cause of the problem and the source of the solution to enable long-term behavioural change for the collective good of the planet.

Although perceived as a negative consequence of human use, the Anthropocene has been interpreted by some to be the start of a positive future, often referred to as 'the good Anthropocene' (Bennett et. al., 2016). This alternative perspective embraces the essential change as an opportunity for new modes of commerce, innovative manufacturing systems and the flourishing of humanity. Some believe we are not in *crisis* but in the beginning of a new ecological epoch, ready for human-directed prospect (Ellis, 2011). In contrast however, the Anthropocene has also been described as a myth, a constructed phenomenon to provide people with comfortable terminology to define the uncomfortable reality the world finds itself in. This perception thinks the Anthropocene is utopian in a future that is currently so uncertain (Aravamudan, 2013).

Since the start of the industrial revolution, the global environment has been undergoing significant change as a direct result of human activity, with every action having a degree of social and environmental impact. The daily use of non-renewable resources has been dated back to the invention of the steam engine, where fossil fuels, including coal, oil and gas, were burnt for power. This was adopted by the UK clothing industry by 1870, where textile manufacturers operated more steam engines than any other industry sector. Whilst the sources of power have since changed, the use of the earth's finite resources has not, with even carbon neutral factories offsetting their use of non-renewable energy rather than changing the method and source of their power.

Fashion's Contribution

Fashion is the second most polluting industry in the world, second only to oil, a finite resource on which the production of textiles relies heavily not only as a source of energy but as the raw material for many synthetic fibres. The shift from the predominant use of natural to synthetic fibres has contributed to the growth of the oil industry since the 1920's, when Nylon, acrylic and polyester were first utilised for fashion applications. The increased use of these oil-derived fibres in conjunction with rising consumption levels have caused the relationship between fashion, humans and the environment to significantly change over time (Brooks et.al., 2017). Despite changes in the levels of consumption and material resources, the reliance on the earth's resources has not waivered, with the development of the value market sector and the fast fashion business model enabling further growth. The production of textile products contributes more to climate change than international aviation and shipping combined and that is without the consideration of social impact that occurs at the expense of humans working in the product supply chain (Environmental Audit Committee, 2019).

The fast fashion business model first came to prominence in 2008, when the recession in the UK caused a surge in popularity of the value and low-end of the fashion market. Whether through necessity or greed, UK consumers have become accustomed to the accessibility of large quantities of clothing at relatively inexpensive prices. Fast fashion focuses on the delivery of catwalk inspired products to the mass market and refers not only to the speed of delivery, but also to the speed of consumption. A garment produced by a fast fashion retailer is made to the quality level to be able to withstand up to only 10 wear and wash cycles before disposal (Shields, 2008). This model of production and consumption has resulted in significant social and environmental pressures on the manufacturing supply chain, with the required speed of delivery to market often only being possible with compromise being made. This consumer appetite for new clothing has resulted in the UK's consumption levels being the highest in Europe at 26.7kg per capita. This compares to a consumption rate of 16.7 in Germany, 16.0 in Denmark, 14.5 in Italy, 14.0 in the Netherlands and 12.6 in Sweden (Commons Select Committee, 2018).

The most sustainable clothing is said to be that which we already own, implying that the use of existing clothing is preventing the further use of virgin materials and ultimately extending the usable life of a product. This extension to the lifespan of a garment however requires alternative user mindsets and the utilisation of methods such as repair and reuse to facilitate practical engagement. Furthermore, education and knowledge are needed to again help develop this systemic shift towards the preservation of clothing in preference to a continual cycle of consumption and disposal. The need for fashion consumers to be upskilled is ever present, with the large majority of people not possessing the ability to apply practical product-life extension strategies such as repair or repurpose. Alternatively, when outsourcing these skills, the provision of repair services and the cost related to this is further putting people off engaging with such strategies, with repairs often costing more than the original purchase of the garment. A report published by The Environmental Select Committee in February 2019 has

called to reduce taxes on repair services, the effective implementation of which has recently been evidenced in Sweden.

The Need for Change

The traditional linear model of fashion consumption is outdated and in need of reform, moving towards a more considered and slower approach to garment production and use. 300,000 tonnes of garments end up in household waste every year (Commons Select Committee, 2018), indicating that consumers either don't know or don't care about the impact the garments are having on the environment. To prevent this, the government has suggested an *extended product responsibility* (EPR) be implemented within a fashion context. This approach would see consumers become custodians of clothing rather than owners, but with the environmental onerous remaining with the producer. This non-permanent ownership supports alternative consumption models such as the sharing economy, which has been suggested as a strategic priority to move the fashion industry from a linear model of *take, make, dispose* to a more holistic ownership model. The rental of fashion has escalated rapidly in the US market, with companies such as Rent the Runway being valued at $1billion in March 2019 (Maheshwari, 2019). This model replicates the rush experienced by consumers when purchasing new clothing without the associated social and environmental costs. The success of the rental or access economy has been evidenced previously across multiple market sectors such as the shift towards streaming film and television through platforms such as Netflix and in the music industry with services such as Spotify.

However, in addition to consumer behaviour change, fashion brands and retailers have their role to play as invested stakeholders in the production and consumption of fashion products. Acting almost as a middle man, the fashion brand has the ability to influence multiple different players, including suppliers during the manufacturing supply chain and their customers through implemented marketing strategies in the purchasing process. At present, evidence suggests that the need for change is being tentatively acknowledged by fashion brands, with conservative action increasingly being adopted across multiple market levels. For example, the recent collaboration between Adidas x Parley has trainers being produced from 75% recycled ocean plastic waste as an alternative to using virgin materials. Further evidence of this existing brand engagement can be seen on the UK high street, where a range of fast fashion retailers have initiated clothing take-back schemes to help reduce the amount of clothing going to landfill in preference of recycling. However, this action is being evidenced in small isolated instances, with the focus towards change often being isolated to one or two areas of the overall fashion lifecycle, i.e. the use of recycled materials or end-of life solutions as previously discussed. In order for large scale impact to be achieved, brands need to extend their commitment to reach their business operations, with values being imbedded into everyday actions opposed to focusing on isolated pockets of concentrated activity. This more holistic approach to creating sustainable change could begin to build momentum in the fashion industry as a whole, helping to develop brand trust and consumer loyalty. This approach would work in opposition to current practice, where the consumer is presented with a series of

choices which require a prerequisite level of knowledge in order to make responsible informed decision.

Incentivising the Consumer

In addition to the retailer being in a powerful position, the consumer too has influence over the choices that they make with their fashion products and consequently the impact these actions have from a social and environmental perspective. Through a series of adaptations in behaviour, consumers can begin to make small lifestyle changes in order to help create a positive sustainable impact. Enactment of their values is essential yet achievable, requiring a slower and more informed approach to purchasing fashion products. Actions such as considered purchasing, shopping as a reflection of personal values, considering alternative options to buying new and responsible disposal are all examples of these changes which consumers can choose to make. However, the successful adoption of such approaches requires active engagement from fashion consumers with the individuals needing to be incentivised to get involved. This encouragement and rationale for engagement is said to often be the cause for the failure of previously launched initiatives, with consumers switching-off to efforts being made to change their fashion use practices. There remain limited examples of this type of activity being exercised in the fashion market, with much focus being on monetary driven motivation opposed to alternative value-based methods. For example, retailers such as H&M and Intimissimi who implement in-store take back schemes offer vouchers in return for unwanted clothes. These however require minimum spends on future purchasing in order for the voucher to be used, encouraging further consumption. Alternative models for motivation are slowly being developed, with Zara collecting unwanted garments but instead of financially rewarding the customer, donating the items to non-profit organisations and in some cases recycling or repurposing goods into fabrics for charitable uses. This approach relies on consumers philanthropic values opposed to physical reward for responsible behaviour. Marks and Spencer however have also utilised thank you campaigns to encourage future engagement with their take-back schemes, making their customers feel good about their behaviour in order to motivate future, repeat engagement.

Further examples of responsible consumer behaviour have focused on aesthetic qualities of the product in the creation of the value an individual places on an item of clothing. Increased value is said to encourage extended ownership and the further likelihood of the engagement with product-life extension strategies such as repair and upcycle. Value is often created within a product when consumers can individually personalise their item, making them different from others. Personalisable items, such as Nike's NikeiD, where consumers can customize shoes, trainers and bags is an example of how a brand has tried to engage their customers in responsible behaviour through the physical form and aesthetics of the end product. This creation of value is also evidenced in the consumer-goods market, with this approach being coined as the IKEA effect, where users who produce, construct or customise products using their own labour increase their personal connection and worth of the item (Norton et. Al., 2012). This concept has been adopted into many retail business models with popular examples

including Build-a-Bear Workshop, where customers can customise their soft toys to be individual and unique to the recipient. A greater time touching objects has been proven to increase feelings of ownership and value (Peck and Shu, 2009), with the physical craft of upcycling requiring the user to not only touch but to also invest time and effort, resulting in a greater sense of value in the end result.

Towards a Responsible Future

Responsible procurement, ownership and disposal are all vital considerations for consumers when exercising their power to create sustainable change for the future of the fashion industry. A new active generation of consumers who are committed to actioning this change have been labelled as *prosumers*, as they have more influence and ability to construct change than ever before. The role of the consumer is no longer limited to being merely a passive user, but now requires them to become an engaged investor in the quest towards responsible systemic change. Individuals can no longer wait for brands alone to take-action, but through the adoption of collaboration and individual contribution, small adjustments in everyday behaviour can be crucial in developing the future environmental impact of fashion.

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